

## Non-Still Life: A Mosaic Portrait of Dimitris Papaioannou

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He has been labelled “a blue-collar worker of the art studio,” “an artist of delicate gestures,” even Greece’s “national artist”<sup>1</sup>; he has been described as a visual artist, dancer, performer, choreographer, and director: most of those who have attributed to him his many designations would concur that Dimitris Papaioannou is a man of many faces and an artist of many talents. Aspects of these appear over the years in his works more and more skillfully and with an increasingly emphatic existentialist twist. On the occasion of the world tour of his acclaimed work *Still Life*, which began in September 2015 in Piraeus, Greece (Piraeus Municipal Theatre), and will conclude in Belgrade, Serbia, on March 31, 2016, this paper offers a mosaic portrait of Papaioannou made up of tesserae—highlights of his thirty-year-old career in the visual and the performing arts—that, much like the artist himself, won’t stay still. As I hope to show, often, elements of one work spill over into others where they are reworked, or elements of one work integrate/conjugate with elements of others to produce new effects. In every case, as the light of reappraisal plays on their surface, it reveals their multifacetedness and their broadening of horizons—qualities of Papaioannou’s work rarely given the credit they deserve by the contemporary local (performing) art criticism.

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*I leave Sisyphus at the foot of the mountain. One always finds one's burden again. But Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks. He too concludes that all is well. . . . The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.*

Albert Camus, 1961

### Introduction: Apprenticeship with Tsarouchis and Kontrosol in Chaos

Born in Athens, in 1964, Papaioannou apprenticed with the famous Greek painter Yiannis Tsarouchis (1910-1989) and later studied at the Athens School of Fine Arts. The words and actions of the Tsarouchis changed his life, as he has acknowledged (Chatzigeorgiou 2015), and one hardly wonders

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1. See, for example, *iefimerida* (22 May 2014): <<http://www.iefimerida.gr/news/155927/«θέλω-την-παρουσία-σου-την-υπαρξή-σου»-ματιές-στα-παρασκήνια-και-τις-πρόβες-του-νέου-έργου>>.

why. Papaioannou was a seventeen-year-old high-school boy, from a lower-middle-class Greek family when he first approached the already accomplished painter and introduced himself and his work; his apprenticeship with Tsarouchis translated into his entering a world where life is steeped in art which until then had not seemed feasible. Tsarouchis assumed a fatherly attitude towards him and soon the former's house at Maroussi became the latter's second home. The artist has given a brief account of his experience as Tsarouchis' apprentice in metaphorical terms: "When you swim in an environment, many things work their way in through your pores; you breathe in the atmosphere." Traces of Tsarouchis' legacy, his "poor art"—the elevation of mundane figures into mythical ones by means of his visual art, a public declaration of the fact that there is poetry in the streets, in the mud, and in abjectness (Daskalopoulou and Kalovyrrnas 2004), can be found in Papaioannou's work to this day, and, perhaps, even more conspicuously so in his more recent works: *Primal Matter* [Πρώτη Ύλη] (2012) and *Still Life – Sisyphus* [Still Life – Σίσυφος] (2014).

It is apparent that he has picked up a strand of tradition of great visual artists, such as Yiannis Tsarouchis, and he confesses that he has inherited from them the "enigma of beauty in relation to truth . . . that is bequeathed to all Greeks and traverses our [Greek] civilization," as he puts it. "This is a great enigma," he continues; "Why does the Greek civilization give expression to what we call 'beauty'? Why does its truth express itself through beauty?" Papaioannou seems to be wrestling and re-falling in love with this enigma in each and every one of his works, at least since the nineteen-eighties, when he was channeling his post-modern sensibilities and early ideological positions into the strip cartoons he was contributing (together with Alexis Bistikas and Pavlos Avouris) to the magazine *Kontrol in Chaos* [Κοντροσόλ στο χάος]. Poems of the visual kind, in some cases closely resembling manifestoes promoting the rights of homosexuals, these early works located Papaioannou in the non-mainstream, urban culturescape. At that point in his career, homosexuality emerged as a kind of fuel for his art, defining its "color, mood, and tone" (Daskalopoulou and Kalovyrrnas 2004).

### **Edafos Dance Theatre (1986-2002)**

Papaioannou has repeatedly stressed that he understands himself as an artist who is always exploring his personal, erotic connection with life in his works. He explains:

I have always been comprehending life through love. And the quality and type of my sexual life have been guiding my creativity quite definitively. Besides, it is a well-known fact that homosexuals in society express themselves through art on behalf of all people. Art is a kind of childbearing for homosexuals. . . . My love life in the city in which I live, at the time at which I live, wandered through many underground streets before it could blossom and that made me . . . have a more complete perception of life. I'm grateful to my nature because it led me through muddy streets that revealed a lot to me. . . . (Daskalopoulou and Kalovyrrnas 2004)

His experiences in the so-called “muddy” streets of the Greek capital infused his work with the Edafos Dance Theatre company [*Ομάδα Εδάφους*], which he co-founded with the dancer and director Angeliki Stellatou upon his return from New York and his studies there at Erick Hawkins’ dance studio (1986). The artist continued to flirt with the margins in works such as *The Mountain – Waterproof* [*Το βουνό – Αδιάβροχο*] (1987), *Medea* [*Μήδεια*] (1993), *A Moment of Silence* [*Ενός λεπτού σιγή*] (1995), *Human Thirst* [*Ανθρώπινη δίψα*] (1999), and *Forever* [*Για πάντα*] (2001). Projects as much visual as choreographic and theatrical in nature, these early works read the body as another narrative. The dancers-performers narrated the body’s encounter with its limits in love and death on stage; underlying subject matter and expressive motifs and forms materialized that gradually came to characterize Papaioannou’s *oeuvre*, lending it its particular sheen.

*Medea*, a project commissioned by Spyros Merkouris, Melina Merkouri’s brother, some time before the Melina’s death,<sup>2</sup> won him the first of several Greek National Awards for Dance (“Best Choreography”); also, it became his first popular hit and marked the company’s transition from the alternative theatre scene to the stage of the National Theatre of Greece. Emotionally accessible but, simultaneously, quite abstract, *Medea* won the hearts and minds of critics and public alike. According to Papaioannou, the performance’s success was primarily due to the manner in which the story was told:

Simple, grandiose, and highly stylized until the moment of betrayal, the play suddenly becomes dangerous and, when the drama prevails, it seems that everything is collapsing before our eyes. Myth meets tragedy in the middle of the performance. The characters are presented as archetypes, whereas the character that was invented for the needs of this production, the Dog, embodies the dark instincts of Medea and acts like an abominable master of ceremonies protecting the witch, while, at the same time, ensures that everything is moving towards the tragic outcome. (Papaioannou)<sup>3</sup>

In the years to follow, the artist engaged with (adaptations of) Greek tragic myth two more times, directing *Iphigenia at the Bridge of Arta* [*Ιφιγένεια στο γεφύρι της Άρτας*] and Iannis Xenakis’ *Oresteia* [*Ορέστεια*] in 1995—the latter with direct reference to *Medea*’s scenic production; both works, however, enjoyed markedly less success than his *Medea*.

Deeply invested in the choreographic exploration of the restlessness and agony of erotic love within visual-art contexts, Papaioannou carried it on to his *A Moment of Silence*, the first Greek scenic text to treat homoerotic love and the “homosexual condition.” Dedicated to a close friend of Papaioannou dying from

2. Melina Merkouri (1920-1994) was a world-famous actress and fighter of the resistance movement against the Greek military junta of 1967-1974. She served as Minister of Culture for eight and a half years (1981-1989, October 1993-March 1994) and became a distinguished politician. Merkouri was loved and cherished by the majority of the Greek people. She died in New York and was buried as a national hero.

3. See in Papaioannou’s official website: <http://www.dimitrispapaioannou.com/gr/medea>

AIDS, this work responded with an unlikely combination of lyric despair and love-exalting hope to the fear of death triggered by the AIDS crisis that ravaged an entire generation. Giorgos Koumentakis' *Requiem*—composed for the purposes of this project, Ntinios Christianopoulos' poetry, and Manos Hatzidakis' music thematized the “dark side of erotic love between men, with the despair of loneliness as its fundamental motif” (Papaioannou, qtd. in Kyriakou). The content of the performance was tragic, its main element was fear, and its movements were slow, erotic, almost, ritualistic. The tableaux Papaioannou created on stage betrayed his artistic origins in the visual arts: in the first part of the performance, the dominant image, that of a giant ladder with razor-like steps, created the effect of a human cataract of crumbled bodies (an allusion to the terrifying God-sent vision of the biblical Jacob); in the second part, the undifferentiated male mass of the first part got personalized and transformed into a multidimensional composition of individuals, whose (now) robust bodies unleashed themselves to the extremities of sexual desire<sup>4</sup>—the ladder substituted by a table which served as a mating dock, alley, sidewalk, and altar. “If the first part is a waterfall, a storm [of death],” Papaioannou has noted, “the second is the raindrops dripping from the leaves when the storm has abated and the first rays of the sun [the first hesitant signs of life] appear” (qtd. in Kyriakou). With that work, the artist performed a kind of exorcism of the fear of death at a time when this was brought quite literally into an intimate proximity with desire.

As in *A Moment of Silence*, so in his award-winning *Human Thirst* (“Production of the Year”), Papaioannou summoned the language of mythical and religious symbols to visualize experiential material and, through it, to pose questions about the nature and meaning of love (motherly, romantic, erotic, etc.), as well as about the neuroses resulting from it. In their very consecration, by means of their figurative use, objects (such as the biblical ladder and the Madonna lily) and figures (such as Virgin Mary and baby Christ) were resignified in such a manner as to be made sacrilegious. The heartbreaking choreographed poetry of Papaioannou in this piece reflected the artist's growing frustration and impatience with the concept (or mytheme) of eternal love—the frustration and impatience of someone who still wants, but finds himself unable, to believe in it. Yet, if *Human Thirst* was intended as a study in frustrated desire, the—also award-winning—*Forever* (2001) exposed desire as a blind force whose sole object is desire itself, and thus as intractable, offering little hope of resolution. With that work, the artist's insights into the problematics of love acquired existentialist dimensions. The tender melancholy of *A Moment of Silence* had turned into the solemn (auto)sarcastic conviction of *Forever*. This ironic counterpoint threw into sharp relief the conflict between a fundamental truth—that time marches on, uncaring and unsparing, and that we are all going to die—and the human notion that there are things (such as love or art or fame) that last forever. It would seem that Papaioannou engaged for the first time,

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4. Tsarouchis' aesthetics are as evident as Christianopoulos' poetics in the rendering of male beauty in the play's second part.

artistically at least, in the painful task of letting go both of the illusion of “love forever” and of the related—entangled with the first—illusion of “art forever.”

In *Forever*, he experimented, also for the first time, with non-narrative approaches to content, structure, and technique, as well as with conscious interaction with the audience. Interestingly, his *tableaux vivants* borrowed heavily from the bold and provocative imagery of graphic novels and of his early visual art works. The organizing image/concept was the fall in the direction of the wind and the performance spoke of “the victory of gravity over humans” (Papaioannou, qtd. in Kyriakou). The wind represented the passing years; the bodies resisting its force, falling and then getting back on their feet. A sort of downward bent marked the choreography as this actualized the triangle: time – weight – fall. The element of suspension served so as to foreground the fleetingness of time much more emphatically than in *A Moment of Silence* (or even in his *Dracula* [Δράκουλας] (1997))—like an onstage pendulum whose every swing was bringing us closer to the end. In that performance, dance, the art of the ephemeral, paid tribute to the ephemerality of the body, its very means of existence. The time from birth to death was imaged as a circle whose center is love, and the cochlear narrative was accompanied by a rapid montage of images which conferred a sense of fluidity to the components of the performance, so much so that the beauty, the poetry of the images seemed almost accidental. The mythico-religious symbols and figures of former works were replaced by quotidian, cheap materials (such as white plastic chairs, black trash bags,<sup>5</sup> popular Greek songs, etc.) and famous show business figures (such as Marilyn Monroe). These emerged regenerated through their new uses and shored up the bubbly mood and ironically dramatic intensity of the performance, further highlighting its air of cynicism, bitterness, and self-ridicule (Kyriakou). The tragic theatricality of the Epitaph, the last part of the performance, sealed this dark parody of love and loss, as bodies (the body of Papaioannou included) and trash got buried in a highly emotive scene in which art manifested as a constant battle against perishability, at once destructive and life-affirming, yet the only human recourse against the ravages of time—however flawed and provisional its comfort may be.

As if to add a further ironic twist to the performance, this project was to be the last that the Edafos Dance Theatre would mount. While the members of the Edafos Dance Theatre were working on *Forever* [Για πάντα], breaches in the relationship between its co-founders, Papaioannou and Steliatou led to the end of their collaboration; the two artists parted ways and the company was disbanded officially in 2002.

### “Athens 2004” and the First European Games

In 2001, Papaioannou submitted his proposal for the artistic design and direction of the opening and closing ceremonies of the 2004 Athens Summer

5. Throughout the performance, the black trash bags operate as multi-functional signs referencing Samuel Beckett’s *Endgame*.

Olympic Games (Games of the XXVIII Olympiad). His proposal was accepted, he was appointed Artistic Director for the 2004 Olympics celebrations, and he and his production team accordingly undertook the challenge of working on a grand-scale project, the like of which Greece had not known until then. His artistic achievement not only received dithyrambic reviews both from the national and from the international press—although voices criticizing both ceremonies on aesthetic and/or ideological grounds were not lacking, but also won him the gratitude of an entire nation. Papaioannou was awarded the Golden Cross of the Honour of Merit by the then President of the Hellenic Republic, Konstantinos Stephanopoulos; he earned the sobriquet “Greece’s national artist”; and he got placed, at least for some time, in the rarefied realm of legend.

The artist has said that the “two ceremonies had been designed so as to counterpoise each other: an Apollonian opening and a Dionysian closing; the spirit and the flesh.” As regards the closing ceremony, in particular, his goal was “to stage it as a celebration of (folk) music and dance—elements that, in Greece, have their roots in the Bacchic rites of antiquity.” Later, however, he lamented the fact that he did not dare push the closing part to the extremes by focusing on “wilder” aspects and forms of the Greek tradition, out of fear that they would probably seem utterly alien, lacking any resonance and/or logic, to the non-Greek audience: “I had dreamt of a far more organic, festive, and chaotic closure, but the result flirted with the beaten track,” he confessed and added with a dash of strained stoicism, “I guess you cannot have it all” (Papaioannou).<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, in retrospect, his choice proved to be the correct one—more suitable than the alternative, anyway, given the Olympics’ motley audience, and since most people outside of Greece had difficulties deciphering even the symbolism of the opening ceremony with its references to Greece’s history. If anything, it “fulfilled the requirements to present a politically correct narration,” as Roy Panagiotopoulou has put it (244), which was, after all, what Papaioannou was commissioned to carry through, aware from the beginning that he would have to work within a specific Olympic tradition and set of conventions.

Following the so-called “auteur” model, both ceremonies referred mostly to the city of Athens—relating it to Olympic ideals (such as human scale, participation, celebration, etc.) and emphasizing its transformation into a modern metropolis—and thematized the “Greekness” of the Olympic Games, as well as their evolution through time. The challenge of the ceremonies, as Panagiotopoulou summarizes, was twofold: on the one hand, “to revive the ‘tired’ Olympic narrative, which had been called into question owing to prior organization scandals . . . , intensive commercialization and gigantism, by referring at the same time to ancient values and ideals”; and, on the other hand, “to present the history of a nation, closely related to the event and at the same time making it popular, understandable, and interesting for foreigners without making it trivial

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6. See: <http://www.dimitrispapaioannou.com/gr/profile/47-productions/2004-closing-ceremony/284-closing-ceremony>



for nationals, which would risk offending their national pride” (241).<sup>7</sup> It was a challenge that Papaioannou admittedly met with success.

On a somewhat lighter note, and before proceeding with a brief discussion of Papaioannou’s contribution to the First European Games, it’s worth considering what John Gill, in his account of “Athens 2004,” had to say of the artist’s work. The journalist writes in a rather sarcastic tone:

Borrowing a few tricks from Robert Wilson’s book of minimalist staging, Papaioannou and a production team of 435 people deployed an estimated 2482 volunteers across an indoor sea in a tableau vivant of Greek history, with mythical creatures, legendary figures (including a topless Minoan princess whose breasts had to be pixilated from timid US TV viewers), living Parthenon friezes and Byzantine icons, a gigantic Cycladic figurine head that opened to reveal a man scrambling over a Pythagorean cube, laser projections, water sculptures, and that young boy aboard that very Wilson-like giant paper boat. Wilson himself would have killed for that sort of budget and logistics. . . . (n. pag.)

The element of exaggeration aside, this is indeed an interesting show of foresight on the part of Hill and one cannot help but wonder whether he had anticipated that, a decade after the Athens Olympics, Robert Wilson would actually invite Papaioannou to present the first chapter of his *Still Life*, “Sisyphus” [“Σίσυφος”], upon which we shall touch presently, at the 2014 Watermill Center Summer Benefit Gala.<sup>8</sup>

Eleven years after the Athens Olympics, in 2015, and in spite of the fact that Papaioannou had promised himself that he would not engage again in similar projects, the Ceremony of the First European Games was held under his artistic direction in Baku, Azerbaijan. The artist agreed to undertake this project due to financial considerations, as he has admitted. Almost half of his works of the last decade, as we shall see, were met with praise but little financial success, and, as the crisis deepened in Greece, Papaioannou felt that it was time to redefine his art with the most minimum of means. To be able to do this, while, at the same time, avoiding producing custom work, he took up what he found “a very interesting, both financially and professionally, proposition from Baku” that would allow him to work without compromises in many years to come: “So I made the decision to re-engage in Games . . . in order to be able to do the work I want without concerns over economic survival.” He hastened to clarify, however, that he does not intend what he did in Baku to become a common practice (Loverdou 2015).

In spite of the artist’s justified worries over the kind and quality of projects like the one in Baku with respect to his artistic vision, the opening ceremony he conceived and directed evolved into “riveting spectacle,” “a rite of images and

7. For a discussion of the twenty-eighth Olympic Games in Athens, see also Panagiotopoulou (2009) 145-62.

8. Papaioannou had worked with Robert Wilson as member of the production team of the latter’s *The Black Rider: The Casting of the Magic Bullets* (1990)—co-created by Wilson, Tom Waits, and William S. Burroughs, and of the production of *Orlando* (1989).

sounds,” that added another triumph to his already impressive record (Tsakiroglou 2015). In Baku, Papaioannou employed some of the “keys” he had discovered/invented while he was working on the Athens Olympics celebrations, insisting on the subtle use of technological advances and avoiding the pitfalls of sensationalism—consistently following the Greek ideal of “moderation in all things.”

Inspired by the age old concept of Azerbaijan as the “Land of Fire,” as well as by Baku’s reputation of being the “City of Winds,” Papaioannou composed the imagery and choreography of the ceremony so that it revolved around the four primordial elements of earth, water, fire, and wind, without forgoing the anthropocentric focus. The artist combined aspects of the local tradition with the notion of a united Europe, partly drawing from the Greek mythology, in order to give to the inaugural event the character of a universal, ongoing, human narrative, at once contemporary and respectful of Azerbaijan’s rich and old culture.

The stunning opening ceremony and its impact, however, were not able to reverse the negative image that the current government of Azerbaijan has earned due to the collective deportations and imprisonment of dissidents which have taken place under its administration. The *Guardian* reports:

The European Games in Azerbaijan have been shrouded in controversy from the start, amid questions about whether a country with such a poor human rights record should host an international sporting event. The run-up to the Games saw President Ilham Aliyev’s government crack down on dissenting voices, locking up journalists and activists on a scale unparalleled in the post-Soviet era, according to Human Rights Watch. Amnesty International was blocked from visiting, and a number of media outlets, including the *Guardian*, were refused permission to report on the Games. (Shearlaw and Jones)

Given this state of affairs, one finds it difficult to put trust into the words of the President of the European Olympic Committee, Patrick Hickey, that Europe’s first Games “bind the five continents of the Olympic Movement even closer together” (qtd. in “Baku”) For his part, Papaioannou has noted that he was deeply concerned about the political situation in Azerbaijan and that if the Games were not organized by the European Olympic Committee he would have thought it twice to participate (Loverdou 2015). Here, of course, is not the place to expound on what his decision would have been in that hypothetical case; and it would be neither just, nor fair. After all, Papaioannou has made clear that his reasons for undertaking that project were primarily financial. Plus, things being as they are in Greece, putting one’s ideological principles before (economic) survival comes with a cost that few artists are willing or able to pay in full.

### **From 2 to *Medea*<sup>2</sup> to and *Still Life* (2008-2016)**

In the years that intervened between the 2004 Athens Olympic Games and the First European Games in 2015, Papaioannou curated the work *Before [Ipriv]* (2005), a concert of Giorgos Koumentakis; presented the *Black Box* (2005), a solo speech performance; and with 2 (2006) he returned to the site of his own personal expression, “furiously exploring the multi-dimensional, non-narrative



structure” that he had first developed in *Forever* [Για πάντα]. That was his first work without the Edafos Dance Theatre and Aggeliki Stellatou, financed exclusively by the private sector. The artist composed 2 as a poetic, pop “ballad for the boys,” an immersion into the world of men in which he addressed “the issue of male nature with understanding, affection, and the necessary cynicism” (Papaioannou).<sup>9</sup> In that work, suggestively penetrated by fragmentary memories of his previous works with the Edafos Dance Theatre, the fleeting encounter of two strangers, whose paths cross only accidentally, seemed to trigger a flow of unexpected events to unfold like onstage comic strips peopled with boys-hybrids and other humanoids. Papaioannou employed the transitional cinematic effects of the *fondue enchaîné* in order to re-produce, as in a dream sequence, the experience of a desultory coming of age within the mechanized rhythms of the post-modern condition. With 2, he succeeded in creating a para-tragedy as an honest mirror of our dysfunctional, phallocratic society which longs for closeness and affection but, due to a lack of bravery, remains trapped within pity and fear while deferring in perpetuity the hope of *catharsis*.<sup>10</sup>

Two years later, in 2008, Papaioannou engaged again with tragedy: he recreated his 1993 *Medea* by commission of the Greek Ministry of Culture for the “Cultural Year of Greece in China.” The artist reworked *Medea* in the light of fifteen years of experience and the result was “a masterpiece of an extrasensory vision” (Dimadi 2008) that enticed both critics and public into Papaioannou’s land of enchantment. Resilient in time, yet now sharper, simpler, and more refined, the artist’s cerebral and profoundly penetrative free treatment/interpretation of the myth of the eternal Medea staggered the audience which exited the theatre, in the words of Evgenia Tzirtzilaki (2008), “existentially relieved.” The performance exceeded, or rather, remapped and refigured the limits of the silent narrative: the dance-theatre dramaturgy “read” with clarity the sociopolitical substratum of the myth. Ileiana Dimadi, in reviewing the performance, wrote: “Paraphrasing what Heiner Müller said of Robert Wilson’s theatre in 1986, we would say that, with the wisdom of fairytales, Dimitris Papaioannou articulates the issue of our times: war of all the classes and races, and species, and genders; a civil war in every possible sense.” Papaioannou’s monumental *Medea* symbolized onstage the biography of this very war. Yet, it did something else too: “it restored the artist Papaioannou to the orbit of a rigorous art that once convinced and shook maniacs and initiates and now, thanks to the popularity of the inspirer, could disturb other stagnant and addicted to a sewage inflow waters, not to say mire” (Georgousopoulos 2008). It, probably, could do that also. But, unfortunately, Papaioannou’s audience was not constituted, at least not for the most part, by the “sensitive receptors” Kostas Georgousopoulos spoke of in his review of *Medea*. Thus, despite the performance’s success, the works of Papaioannou that immediately followed

9. See: <http://www.dimitrispapaioannou.com/gr/recent/2>

10. For discussions of 2, see also: review by Dio Kangelari, in the booklet accompanying 2’s DVD version, and Kostas Georgousopoulos (2007).

were not welcomed enthusiastically by the audience; apparently, the “receptors” were not attuned to the nuances of the artist’s vision.

The first fissure in the relationship between Papaioannou and the (Greek) audience came with *Nowhere* [*Πουθενά*] (2009): the much anticipated work that inaugurated the new Main Stage of the National Theatre of Greece and that defied expectations in not becoming a success. The site-specific performance—designed so as to be produced exclusively on the Main Stage, which was stripped of all illusionistic effects (such as scenery)—featured twenty-six performers who measured and were measured against the dimensions and possibilities of a space that ultimately turned into non-space because it became every-space; a (non)space whose “presence” was not only marked but thoroughly defined by the human presence. It was in that performance that Papaioannou implemented for the first time his “body mechanic system,” which was later to be employed by Akram Khan in his own *Dust*.<sup>11</sup> Despite the performance’s ingenuity, the audience did not respond to its appeals. Papaioannou left for New York with a Fulbright scholarship and, two years later, as if trying to exorcise *Nowhere*’s failure by means of an ironic inversion of sorts, he created *In* [*Μέσα*] (2011), the work that bespoke a second, deeper fissure in the artist’s relationship with the audience.

The shift in emphasis from the dimension of time in the earlier plays of Papaioannou (*A Moment’s Silence* and *Forever*) to the dimension of space in the ones that came much later became self-evident with *In*. The artist was determined to explore and experiment more boldly with the many functions the theatre (stage) can perform and with the very way the theatre operates. Throughout the six-hour performance, the spectators could join the performers in the small theatre spaces the former were occupying and through which they moved, engaging in the same tasks which Papaioannou calls “the basic functions of the return to the nest.” With this performance, the artist transformed the theatre into a site of encounter; the performance itself was meant to be “a monumentalized, spiritualized image of what we all do at the end of the day or during a break,” and a means towards the abolition of the boundary between the public and the private (sphere and self) (Kriou 2011). “With this work,” he has argued elsewhere, “I tried to use the wide platform that was given to me in order to do a huge experiment of purely artistic nature; I wanted to invest the momentum I had gained in something subversive and full of energy” (qtd. in Ioannou 2014). Yet, both the premises of the experiment and its results were not communicated to the audience as Papaioannou had hoped they would. The artist found it difficult to cope with *In*’s box office failure and realized that his dream for large-scale, experimental projects was now over. It was then that he placed a bet with himself to create his next works with the least possible means, and part of this choice was to also deploy himself (Charami 2015). Both his *Primal Matter* and his *Still Life* can be thought of as works made along this direction.

In *Primal Matter*, as the performance’s name indicates, the artist made use

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11. See: <http://www.dimitrispapaioannou.com/gr/>

of the most basic materials in order to lend a fundamental erotic quality to existential concerns and attend to the naked human condition with calibrated sensitivity. The hybrid performance (in terms of design and content) featured two male performers (the one was Papaioannou) whose dance (re)traced the course of the human body in the land of art and showed it to be as much pure and unelaborated matter, able to be reconstituted again and again, as matter devised, controlling and controlled. In the first case, the pre-lapsarian body, the *homo naturalis*, or kouroi, or primal matter betrayed the falsity of man-made categories as it consented to be rent in the process of undergoing *sparagmos* [σπαράγμός] and becoming a carcass on the altar of Art. In the second case, by contrast, the post-lapsarian, black clad body of Papaioannou, the *homo modernus*, or citizen, or artist performed the rending: a series of desecrations and creative reworkings/reversals that treated the classic ideals of harmony and balance iconoclastically, with what, at first glance, looked like utter disrespect but turned out to be the artist's attempt to reclaim them for a new age that has made a habit out of distorting or sneering at greatness. In the course of the performance, the two bodies opened up to the possibility—and the reality—of their violent interpenetration as both assented to give (up) parts of themselves while painfully striving to be reconciled (or compromise?) with one another. The two, eventually, comprised a forced but necessary plural oneness. They gave birth to a new identity. (Although one comes to doubt whether it is “identity” what this performance presented the audience with and not a kind of frustrated, inconclusive dialogue between the sanctity of the impregnated with possibilities human body and the profanity of its alter ego, the modern self.) Like a skilled tactician, Papaioannou treated the human body as matter to be molded between the forces of brutality and love, light and darkness, and then emerge (a)new, totally different and yet the same, at the other end of the spectrum of existence. The artist has said of his work: “I conceive of the human body as a battlefield: I am trying to shatter and then reassemble it” (qtd. in Guatterini 2015); yet, when he was done reassembling it, one could not but suspect that it was not the human body that had thoroughly transformed but the shadowy world hosting it. That was how Papaioannou chose to flesh—rather than spell—out his reflective and caustic politically-inflected intervention in Greece's current historical predicament. He also reminded the Greek audience, saturated with but not yet weary of sensationalism and triviality, that the human body, operating under a certain spectating condition can and will suffice—to say the least—as primary material (or primal matter) to perform a single, “naked” idea as the structural element of a performing art event. The “return home” of *In* eventually touched home when, first, envisioning and, then, acting upon the present of a future past, it returned to the home's foundations.

*Primal Matter* can be also said to have set up the conditions for the production and reception of Papaioannou's next work, *Still Life*. The last in a series of works (*Nowhere*, *In*, *Primal Matter*) in which the artist redefines the use of the basic scenic materials, this work refers, according to its creator, to “the history

of visual art, human survival, and to a kind of stage event where movement and stillness converse with each other” (Loverdou 2015). Here, Papaioannou treats the myth of Sisyphus, or rather Albert Camus’ interpretation of the human condition by means of this myth, through the lens of his accumulated experience and in terms of the metaphor of the two opposite faculties of gravity and lightness (or materiality and spirituality). *Still Life*, he has remarked, “levitates between weight and lightness,” and he proceeded to define “lightness” as “a wish for spirituality, a wish for meaning, a wish for man’s attunement with some reason for existence on earth for as long as his short life lasts” (Chatzigeorgiou 2015). As in *Primal Matter*, here again the artist performs an onstage dissection of emotions and identity issues, but, most importantly, he brings about a pause in time and while this lasts, in a condition of suspense, he orchestrates a strange, tragic anthropogeny. Under the threat of an angry, suffocating firmament/cosmos that seems about to come crashing down upon the struggling humans at any moment, eight performers, including Papaioannou, undergo with perseverance a series of transformations: from ancient Greek deities, to sculptures, to living temples, to hybrid, hermaphrodite creatures born of a plaster wall-womb whose precarious balance they have been charged with maintaining for life. Their struggle with each other and with the stone load/ruins (of the hope for meaning?) in their compulsive efforts to (re)constitute an uncanny Frankenstein-like human body/self dramatizes the paradox, even the absurdity, of the human condition. They perform and, at the same time, resist their agonizing labor, hopeless but alive, in the teeth of perpetual cancellation, on account of their indomitable will. In the end, Papaioannou’s Sisyphuses seem neither happy nor unhappy; the audience, though, has been enabled to imagine that they could be (and not because they *must* imagine them so). In the here and now of the performance, not all is well when it does not end well, but some things are—Papaioannou makes sure we know this by the end; so we persevere. Dense with meaning and unmistakable allusions to Greece’s peculiar current state of being, the performance resonated deeply with the Greek audience. An extraordinary study on the essence of human existence, the touring *Still Life* is currently transfusing Papaioannou’s artistic vision and philosophical outlook in other parts of the world, proving that Papaioannou is not only the person who transformed Greek modern dance and dance theatre, advancing both to another level, but is also an artist whose creations constitute exportable products capable of piercing through the insularity of the contemporary Greek culture and showing that Greece is more and different than its glorious past and inglorious present-in-crisis.

### Concluding Remarks

The conscious awareness of the perishability of matter (including human matter), the experience of degeneration over time, the condition of ambivalent suspension between two (or more) opposing states of being, the blessings and challenges of mortality, the interplay of materiality and spirituality, *eros* and *thanatos*, the problematics of love, and the reality of perseverance are all constitutive ele-

ments of Papaioannou's thematic palette, as broad as his multi-media canvas. Using both carefully and skillfully, the artist has managed to radically alter the Greek performing arts landscape, working on the cusp between the visual and the performing arts and revealing how fertile the ground of their intersection is.

After thirty years of hard work, marked by explosions of boundaries and revelations of many kinds (generic, media, conceptual, ideological, etc.), Papaioannou admits that he is tired: "My body can't take it anymore and this is an experience I live with everyday. But I'm not afraid; I invoke the argument of 'a little more' and pretend I don't understand" (Charami 2015). It's not that he refuses to see and recognize the reality; it's that he is not yet ready to give up on his "alchemy," as he calls it, his "way of living."

Like the hybrid Sisyphean creature he performs in *Still Life*, Papaioannou reflects upon his (human) fate, trying to make meaning out of it, and with each work renews his commitment to it. Unlike this Sisyphean creature, it would seem he places the hope of someday dealing successfully with fate's unanswerable mysteries on the power of his transcendent "alchemy." In the meantime, he relishes his art of the ephemeral before its every necessary undoing. One must imagine Dimitris Papaioannou is happy.

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